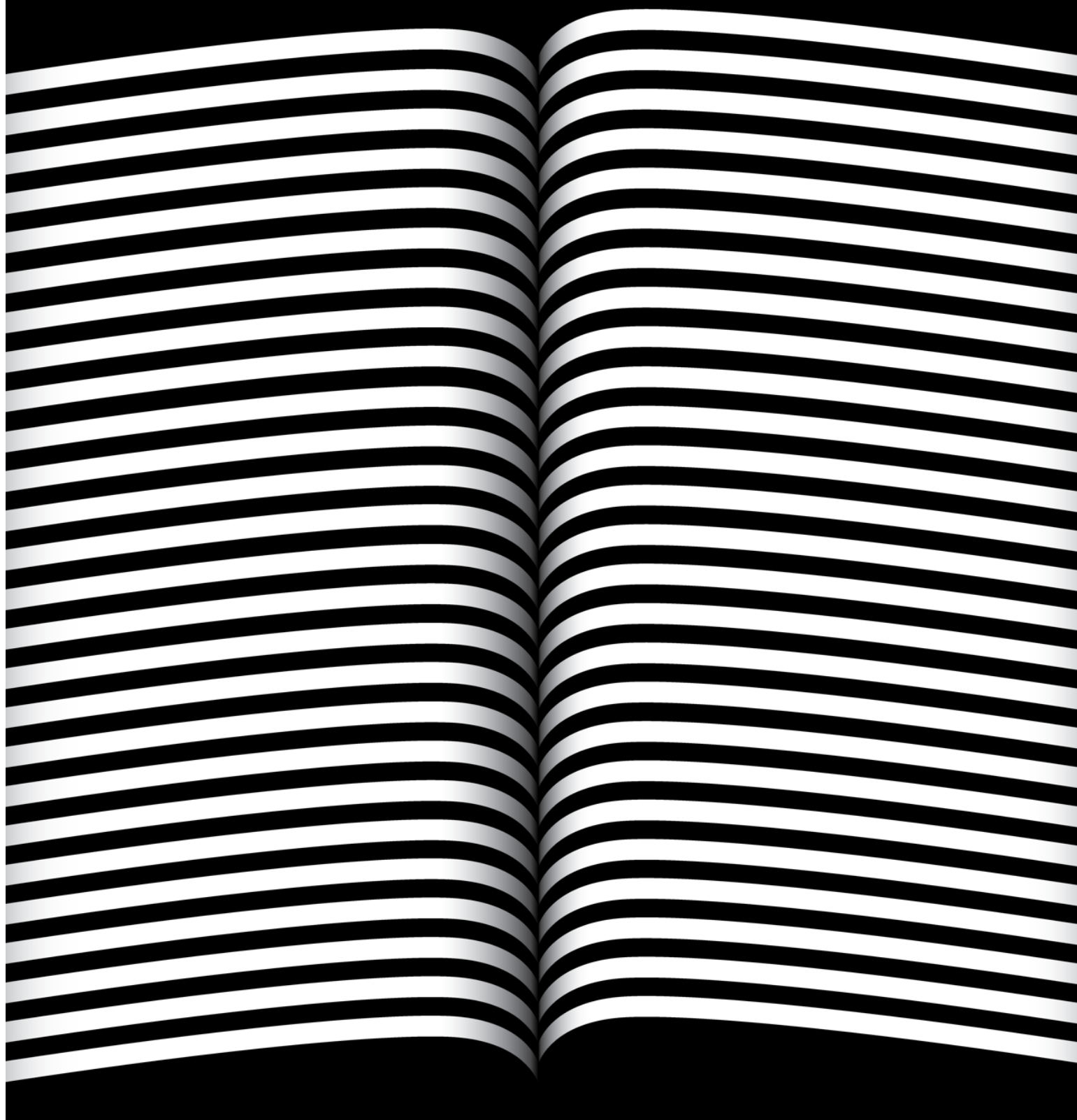


What Went Wrong For

by Aidan Herbolich



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Losing Association.

Ron Capgras was with his wife Kim in a diner. This was the place they always went for a good quick bite. If you asked the wait-staff about them, they might tell you they're the kind of couple that spoke little and tipped well no matter what. Twenty percent. For their consistency the staff treated them the same as they would anyone else.

The two have grown into each other over a span of decades. They held hands on the street, even then. Sometimes Ron's fingers shook in her hand. Ron's eyes always looked tired and he rattled without meaning to. He couldn't help any of it. As for Kim, well, she was as radiant as ever. That was what Ron might tell you.

Or, maybe, he might say that she was the light of his life, his mana, a term he loved. But really, Kim too was slowing down. Kim, too, was shaky.

Looking away from his wife to the menu so he could pick something different this time, he found that he could not remember what she looks like. He looked up again to bring her face back to his mind. The rosy-cheeks, the thick eyebrows, the narrow, smiling lips, and the gentle round of her chin, all of it back in mind. Looking away, the features slipped like water poured. Attempting to recall her again, a blurred shape was all that lingered opposite him in the booth. He heard her hands fumble with the utensils on the table, as though trying to learn what they are for. He could no longer remember what each utensil was called. She focused his attention with a question.

“Ron, how have we done this for so long?”

“Wrong? When has anything gone wrong?”

“Is wrong bad, hon? Have you had this red wine before?”

“No. It hurts my teeth,” he noticed she looks ready to play, as though their talk was banter. He needed to defend his teeth. “I tell you I think my molars are rotting out, right there below my nose? I floss, you know I floss.”

She seemed surprised, but followed the subject change. “Do I floss too? Does it hurt? I don't use the bathroom with you, I hope.”

“Do we have the same bathroom?”

“We only have one, hon.” She cocked an eyebrow, concerned that he asked that.

“I suppose our schedules are different.” he conceded, but needed to ask. “What is it that you with your time, again?” He couldn't remember.

He stared at her for a long time. He knew that when he looked away that she would vanish from his mind as she did before, and he knew that he may not have long before he didn't know her at all, that he'd be too disoriented to return to recognition ever again.

This might be it.

But as long as he looked to her for this moment, she'd be there. A snapshot-like burn in. This was the ending of things, and he recognized it while he was still able to recall that there was anything ending at all. So he stared on, tearing up, afraid to blink. He remembered when they first ate at this diner decades ago. She tried to play along with him, staring back, as though he were playing with her, as though this was another manifestation of the playful flirtations they still maintained. She blinked. He blinked.

The booth they shared was beside the pane glass storefront with an open sign flickering neon above. Outside, fog rolled gentle into the street, obstructing their view of the foot traffic. Maybe they could enjoy watching passerby but nothing could be seen outside the window. There was nothing to do but look back at one another, the distortion of the overhead lighting bending and breaking in their glassware and their dishes, unsure of where to land. He knew he knew her, but wasn't sure how. And he knew that, over the time of knowing each other, he built that love over shared things, small things like television and breakfasts, using those shared interests and cares as the ropes that held them together. He even connected with things that solely she liked and he wouldn't have otherwise. He recalled he didn't know which one started displaying an interest in rock climbing, yet he suspected they both go once a week, for the sake of one another. He can no longer recall the look of the rock wall they scaled so often.

She turned to him then, frustration visible in the crinkling of her eyes. He thought the waiter was familiar, though he could not place him. Still, he looked forward to the meal ahead.

Being Like God.

Because she slapped her hands against his dining room table, the two glasses of water rattled with small droplets cresting the edges of each, freeing themselves. His prescription container was knocked over by the force of her slap, spilling out his medication. The grey pills rolled along the table, a selection of which came to rest in the droplets. She regretted making a mess—messy states so displeasing to her that it was capable of overriding any anger—and sat down. The seat creaked as she settled her weight, recomposing herself.

Was it three months she had not been in his apartment? Yes. And it was three days—her educated guess from the date of the label on the bottle, unless he'd re-upped—that he had been taking the pills, the *nonvolozimol*. Taken twice daily it sucked any want straight out, straight out, out into the ether or the void or space wherever as long as it was no longer within oneself. And

without want there was nothing to desire, or crave. A radical therapy. That was what she knew of the medication. She wanted nothing more but to see how true her understanding was.

He failed to react to her outburst, and the failure was a point in favor of the power of the medication. He was placid. His sloping brown eyes, frayed eyebrows, and line-level lips conspired to communicate nothing, or maybe they had nothing to communicate. She decided to do the communicating for a while, and this was different from the way things went when she lived with him. That was a trimester, three moons, no drinks, no fights, no make-ups, no nothing. So she talked, as much as she had ever hoped to.

—I only called because I hadn't seen you in months. And when you picked up the phone, the one over there, that you still have a landline, I swear, I wondered why it had been three months. And of course I know why it had been but just in that little moment the click when the line turned over and it was you, it was your ear against your earpiece and my mouth against my microphone and I wondered to myself why it had been so long and when I say it was a moment I meant a *moment* because it snapped all back in place before I could entertain the rationalizations for seeing you in person.

He continued to give nothing away, and spoke only two words.

—In person.

—In person. That's right. That's what got to me on the phone too, the repeating.

—Repeating.

—Yes, well. So cool and collected on the phone. You sounded so obviously different so medicated that I knew I needed to push at your edges. I bought you a case of beer. I thought you might want them. A parting gift, maybe. Maybe I'm testing you. But here we are instead, just water. That's good you know? I I, I'm not trying to pass judgement here trust me on that. I am

accommodating. And I bet the only reason you are drinking a glass yourself is because you saw me pour one for myself from your tap and I'm starting to think I've entered the apartment of a mimic, a weird mime. When you agreed over the phone so calm like I didn't ruffle any feathers, I knew absolutely that you had been medicated smashed away into the nothing across the table from me right now. I'm impressed, there should be a few verbal whacks coming this way if there's any remnant of you sitting there. Maybe there is—I think there is. I think that the only reason you aren't yelling as loud as I am right now is because you have no idea how to want to do that anymore. And when we were on the phone I said I missed you.

—Missed you.

—Yes, and that's the exact same thing you said to me on the phone then as well. And then I said I wanted to tell you how far I'd come and what did you say but *How far I'd come*, just spitting it right back at me and I'm sure I imagined the spittle flying from your mouth because there was a severe absence of inflection to your voice. It was like listening in for *nothing*. And that's the exact moment I left behind any thought of seeing you, and speaking to you and apologizing for the slights I inflicted on you, even though if we tallied up slights on both ends I'd say you owe me quite a debt. You didn't even mean to mock my triumph but you did, you did, you did. So that's why I asked if you wanted me to bring a drink—something that would have been a joke from me any other time of the day but it wasn't, it was serious and searching and it found its target—and that's how I knew you'd just say *drink* right back. And with you and me and us, that's want enough for me.

Not far from the table at the other end of the studio apartment sat the case, the cardboard glistening with condensation.

—Buying the stuff exhausted me. Truth is, it was alien to buy again to look away from the light back down to the bottles in the bag, I picked that little riff up from my sponsor, you know It's a bit heavy, but it stick in my mind. And here I am saying it to you right now. But the drinks are just for you and if I didn't know any better I'd think you are trying to be conscientious. Are you suddenly playing the saint? It's as though you're not having a drink, a drink I bought you, because you're worried that the sight smell and sound of someone consuming such a beverage in my proximity would keel me over in temptation. You can stop that little game now, you can stop putting yourself above me. I'll keep on being up here and by no means are you capable of climbing up the mount. Everything's gone flat for you at the moment anyway. I've got a will and I get to say what it wants to do. Unlike you, and people aren't all like you even though you'd disagree if you could, some of us can control ourselves and even if I was like you the sight of you doing anything is enough to turn me off doing it. So thank you for saving me from temptation just by being yourself.

She looked out the window beside them, a familiar view of the tenement wall the next lot over. A window into an empty apartment aligned to fit perfectly within the frame of his window. She continued.

—You probably still hate me don't you? I've lost friends before, just through what I put them through and what we put them through, I accepted this a while ago. All the rages and instability and foot-stomping. We had friends who after a while stopped making the journey across the street to see me or you and stopped contacting either of us and still even now refuse to say a word to me. The ones who did stick around were your buddies and there's no way they would go where I was headed. I've gotten in touch with the ones who left my life and rightfully so just look at me, the rough edges still haven't smoothed out, and on the phone I try to tell them

that I've lasted three months, chip and everything, and I hoped to God that would get through to them because it has been solitary these months, I've been without a single person who knows me and its crushing me. But I can't tell them that, not right away, I just hold my tongue and I cross my fingers, hoping they pick up the line and give me an opportunity to make amends. And you know what, most of them didn't pick up. It didn't sting too bad when they don't, but it was the ones who did and then hung up once it registered that it was me calling, those hurt real bad. Denise was the first of those, remember her? I know she answered, hung on the line long enough to entertain listening to me then click buzz and no chance to make amends and no goodbye or anything like it. Only a firm closing of the avenue. So after a string of those I wrote down a zippy blurb inviting them to call me back so I could make amends, if they'd like to welcome me back into their life. And I was prepared to give the speech to you, if I hadn't realized what you were on. I had special touches drafted up for you because of us and because of how you left it after we tried AA.

Appearing to savor the syllables, he spoke.

—AA.

She noticed how the wrinkles on his face looked strained and that his skin blemished quickly whenever he spoke, as though any movement at all was an irritant.

—Do you remember six months ago when decided that we'd get a drink to mourn, once we were told at the clinic that the fetus was doomed and learned the meaning of fetal alcohol syndrome, about fissures, too-thin lips and micrognathia and mental illness and the fear that swelled in me as the symptoms piled, how we decided that since it was doomed and that we'd get rid of it since it was only the first trimester and there's nothing there but a broken seed. So we got a cab to take us to a part of town where we still had a chance at getting served and we hit

the bottle harder than we ever had. And that was when in the corner booth of some old dive where you just know they water down anything with a proof above a hundred, we made a pledge.

—Pledge.

—We pledged that we would *never* take another sip, not until we had a child. So we tried the first that might pop into any repentant American mind, AA. Gave ourselves one last night of drinking and we agreed to go the next day, that meeting in the back room of a church by the tracks a few blocks from this apartment. I want you to remember this, and I want you to see it the exact way I did. So understand, you slob.

He glowered right back at her.

—You slob.

—With AA, I couldn't believe you. At first I couldn't blame you because it was like the facilitator of the meetings thought it was supposed to be run like we see on TV not how the pamphlets present it. Comically they've got all the props too, the folding chairs and the bad coffee and they even insist on fake names when it's a small community and word gets around so who are we faking here? So it's no surprise to me when you laughed, God how you laughed, how you laughed when they insisted some well-meaning old man give us the spirituality clause, what I understood to mean *just to let you know but we'll be asking that you get on your knees and pray that something greater than you can help you control yourself because lord knows no living person can escape*. And it took a few times for me to hear it and take it in and take it seriously by which point it felt like I was getting wrapped up in a nice fleece blanket. But that first time we heard it we were both looking at the folding seats in front of us afraid to look like we were new and still shocked that we had lowered ourselves to meetings. We were afraid they'd know we were so fresh off the bottle that it smelled on our breath. And, Christ, they ran the place just like

we used to see on TV. Like we were on set. The roundtables, the bad coffee, the folding chairs, the works. And it seemed like they meant to. Like they were trying to be a show. You thought that was so funny. And you tried to hold in your laugh but all you succeeded in doing was turn it into a giggle. But still you looked down like you were praying, you fool. Do you know how you looked then? How disingenuous you seemed to all the world? Even when I spoke to the room about the pledge that brought us there, and I was crying on their little makeshift plywood lectern, you laughed.

Staring back he replied with perfectly mimicked intonation.

—Laughed.

—No, no, no. That opened a door for me and the vulnerability gave me something to be like, something to pursue. I understood why they insisted on giving us the clause. God never had a problem with booze. God never had a monkey on his back. So: Be like God. That was the equation for me, and there were starts stops restarts when you were still around because you didn't care and it wasn't serious to you. A life wasn't on the line, even if you kept sneaking your drinks while I kept straight. A handsome all-pistons firing baby would come of it.

She went over to the sink to refill her glass.

—I remember the day I felt your understanding of me shift, you know. Do you remember what you said about the meetings?

—Meetings?

—I wish this was just you playing dumb. All the sponsors they looked so on-call so pessimistic so on-guard and you wondered to me how they kept it together and how they kept coming back to help a repeat offender but the sponsors were too stupid to realize they were reading a broken script. And I could tell that the only thing you identified about them as people

was their role as a sponsor. How each of them *must* be some lost shepherd going on an ego trip in the final territory society will allow him. I want you to know that I think something different about your observation now. Those sad sponsor types, the rude bartends that wouldn't serve either of us, the as-you-called-them losers speaking at the start: that's just what those people happened to be doing then, and that's not them.

—Not them.

She stood up, pacing the room. —Nobody sits around being that person all the time. That's just a thing they do. The sponsor sponsors with his whole self but you'll never find all of him in his sponsoring. My sponsor tried his hardest to make sure I couldn't ever find him in there if I tried. He does other things, though I'll never know what. He might control himself, he might have kids, he might have people who care about him and who he cares about, he might grill out every Sunday, and none of those things are him either. I'll never find him anywhere but he's there, right there in front of me helping me not drink another drop in his own way. And I could try to be like him. But where would that have gotten me but just trying to be like another alcoholic, the only difference between us that he's managed to not drink longer than I have. So I had to be like God. What's the lesson there, otherwise, save for endurance?

—Endurance.

—And I am willing to forgive you for assuming their whole person equaled the sliver you saw of them. But you went and did it with me too, once you saw me with their props you couldn't separate me from the meeting-me. You *knew* me!

Sobbing, she regained control of her voice.

—And I think you were onto something by choosing to ignore them. There was no way the shill they peddled would have worked for you, is that it? They wanted to lead a part of you, and

there's nobody who can lead you not even yourself. You would have found out that the good ones there will point you to God. They pointed themselves to God and led by example and told me *look, missy, if you want to take this seriously this is how you do it. Look up.*

–*Look up.*

–Certainly something you never tried. You only saw the Earth. You used to talk and you used to be a real asshole when you did, but now you pop your pills pop your pills. A twice a day commitment, the only two things you want anymore, and you do nothing and imitate nothing and want nothing. But that's not true, is it? There's something you're wanting. Even if, right now there's nothing for you to fight against there must be something you're fighting, because you're violent and you need to be. There's no way this prescription could stop something that deep in there. I saw the way you consumed, the way you needed. It permeated everything, soaked every single desire you had and warped it into a mechanism to obtain more. You've traded one escape for another and I won't have it.

She went over to the case, pulling apart the condensation-dampened cardboard, popped open one of the beers, and placed it in front of him.

–So come here and reject your serenity as you've always done. Drink.

–Drink.

He sipped and didn't look to savor a second of it. He could have been drinking vinegar the way he reacted. She yelled at him. –Is this some act now? You still want it, the pills can't keep you from want! Drink.

–Drink.

He took another sip, coughed at the liquid. Seeing him cough, a vulnerable behavior for someone not displaying behavior, renewed what little feeling she had left latent for him, and the

possibilities that emerged when she first called him returned. She leaned down and kissed him, his line-level lips unresponsive, tasting of beer and dehydrated saliva. She liked the taste, and it slid on her lips like a dream she was trying to remember.

—What'll you do now?

The equation of desire and desires worth imitating kept her stable, but seeing him there removing the equation entirely, removing God and desire and providing instead the emptied space of wantlessness. Sipping at the beer, she grabbed a sodden pill from the table and threw it back, hoping it would help her.

Teaching Riddles to the Sphinx.

Someone somewhere in Chicago, or Milwaukee, or even St. Louis, went onto their laptop and put together an online cart: reams of paper, detergent, and new bedsheets for the kids. Who knows, they might have optimistically thrown in an oil-painting kit, or a few zesty balls of yarn for themselves. Because this someone has paid a premium, the order was expected to be fulfilled, packaged, sent, and to have arrived at his or her doorstep within two business days. Theseus Incorporated, provider of the carts, developed efficiencies to make that possible. They shaved away minutes through distribution deals, hours by strong-arming delivery companies. And they established warehouses strategically positioned across the country. These warehouses—their cleverest efficiency—was infrastructure the likes of which the American consumer had never known.

The order was passed to warehouse twenty three, a facility stationed just off I-80 in Joliet, Illinois. A space measured in terms of acres, to span it was measured in minutes, even at a full sprint. Steel-girded shelving filled the floor, mapped by row and column. Numbered bins filled the shelves, each bin dedicated to containing as much of a product as it could stock. Employees sprinted through the columns and the rows, guided only by a paging device that gave instructions. Jeff Olsavsky's read *R52C113B17, 2, 1:35*. Row fifty-two, column one-thirteen, bin seventeen. Two of them. He had one minute thirty-five seconds to reach the bin, obtain two of the contents of the bin, and carry them to the processing belt. If it took less time, wonderful. Theseus Incorporated might be able to improve their clever efficiencies. If it took more time, it would be marked as a failure of Jeff's legs, arms, and mind. Each employee is only allowed a certain number of those failures a day before a terse reprimand is called for. And a certain grim number of reprimands results in termination. He'd received multiple reprimands this week for his slowness. But, he told himself, he was the kind of person who learned. He'd see to it that he'd be here a while—as long as he, his wife, and his permanent-guest brother Daniel needed.

What the job lacked in flexibility it made up for in clarity. Jeff liked that. And though he had been working in warehouse twenty-three for a week now, his wife Pattie liked the exercise it gave him, and he liked what it has done to his calves. He was a dense, stocky man. He had owl's eyes, a bent nose, and lips that curled on either end as though about to smile, all the time. The very first day of work was grueling. Eight hours of sprinting and getting lost and running even harder to make up for time. By the end of his shift his legs cried out to be put down like a crippled horse at the track. When he made it to his home, he sprinted to the freezer and took all of the ice, then all the towels from the bathroom and hastily wrapped the cubes in the towels and the towel-cube monstrosity around his legs. The dampening towels gave him the look of a knee-

down Michelin man. Much of the ice was in direct contact with his skin, but that stung less than the legs themselves. At the sight of him, Daniel laughed. Too exhausted to defend himself, he hooked his peering eyes at him, all the childlike hurt he could muster. And Daniel laughed often in Jeff and Pattie's apartment. He had nothing to do but laugh, since he was in Jeff's home more than Jeff was. Only time he didn't laugh was when he was in the corner of the living room trying to set up a photography lab for the eBay shop he was starting. He had been living with them for months now. Shorter and thinner than Jeff but with the same nocturnal eyes, he hadn't had a boss nor an income in two years. He was as willful, smart, and totally alone save for the two of them. Six months prior, Daniel showed up at Jeff's doorstep with a duffel bag of clothing and a crate of presumably stolen photography equipment, asking to stay for a while until his eBay market photography gig caught on. He'd heard about the enterprise from a decade-old copy of WIRED magazine in a diner bathroom. "People have stuff they don't need, might have thought they did at one point. But they don't anymore and it's just sitting to rot. That's where I come in: a call to me will help them turn that rot into cash. Once some of the items I photograph get sold, word will spread. I can hear them now. Hey," Daniel took on an authoritative swell of a voice, the way he thought a seasoned veteran of e-commerce might sound, "Who took the shots of the authentic signed Elvis Presley bobble head you sold? Who snapped the pictures of that genuine leather Volkswagen headrest? They'll want to know who. It's me. And before you know it, I'll be the number one eBay photo guy in the Midwest." Disarmed by his enthusiasm and forced by his actual foot in the doorjamb, Jeff let him in. Pattie allowed it, wary of Daniel that she was. "Blood is blood", she conceded.

Pattie, though, she didn't laugh when Jeff wrapped himself up in ice and towels. "They're sculpting you into a real David," she said while re-wrapping him so less ice would be directly on

his legs, “a true specimen after this much exercise.” Jeff was still cranky from his brother and not in the mood to receive a compliment. “Yeah,” he said, “but David was made of stone.”

Jogging down to column one-thirteen and over to row fifty-two, he traced the bins along the first shelf until he found seventeen. Floral-patterned twin-size bedsheets. He shoved one under each arm and jogged through the columns to the processing belt in the middle of the warehouse. He dropped them to the belt. He pumped a fist in the air, a ritual that management encourages. The fist pumps maintained morale. It was the last fifteen minutes of his fifth day, and ever since day one’s towel incident Pattie offered to have an ice bath ready for him before he came home.

But there was time for more runs. *R11C27B2, 1, 0:45*. An ice scraper. *R18C55B21, 4, 1:03*. Four containers of lubricant. *R102C8B8, 1, 0:38*. A single ballpoint pen.

Before leaving, each employee was required to check in with the shift manager about their performance in the day. A quick “well done” or a terse “do better tomorrow” was what usually came of it. Today it was a khaki panted white shirted kid in his mid-twenties, reeking of regularity.

“Jeff. Your timecard tells me you’re new. And that’s great. It takes all the new hires some time to get used to our tempo,” his voice grew transactional, “but you’ll need to move a lot faster. You’re nowhere near our baseline.”

“I’m getting a good rhythm, sir.” Jeff wished the shift managers were given name tags, if only to save him from resorting to *sir*.

“That’s great to hear,” the kid’s posture jolted up stiff with programmed excitement, “because tomorrow we’re pairing off the running staff to see who gets permanent positions. Get ready!” Jeff had heard about the competitive environment that the Theseus Incorporated

maintained during his first day orientation. They'll pair off employees into teams, and see how effectively each team performs a task. The teams that win receive permanent hire positions, positions with upward mobility and job security. No more worrying about reprimands. He needed the peace of mind afforded by such stability. And he wanted the satisfaction that he was swift enough to get it.

Home was where his brother was. Jeff parked in the apartment lot, savoring the choice to walk or run, he moseyed up the stairs to the flat as slow as he could. As he approached his apartment, Daniel's voice could be heard shouting, first muffled, then clearer. Jeff heard the phrase "You know less about light than a deep sea squid, old hag" from his brother, then "You learned how to steal homes from hermit crabs, you dirty claw dragger," from his wife. Opening the door, Jeff saw Daniel in the living room rolling up the white background tarp that formerly hung behind the couch, shouting at Pattie, who was in the bedroom, throwing photography equipment through the door back into the living room. Turning the corner to check the bathroom, not a cube of ice was to be found.

"The lighting's better in your bedroom," said Daniel, shrugging his arms at Jeff. "It'd just be a little while. The morning and evenings are the golden hours."

"The light's why we sleep here. Golden hours, hell. Stop feeding me these golden showers. There's no way around it. My house, my rules."

Daniel's photography equipment had slowly cannibalized Jeff and Pattie's home space. At an imperceptible rate, the lightbulbs and cables and tarps and umbrellas filled the floors and

chairs and tabletops. Today, the equipment had made its way into Jeff and Pattie's bedroom, a wake-up call for her.

"You're not taking another photograph in this house if you keep taking it over. Start paying rent and we can have a different conversation."

"I won't be taking another photograph unless the light's good anyway, Pattie. Jeff, thank goodness, brother. Could you talk some sense into your wife?" Jeff considered saying nothing, balanced against the opportunity to display a moment of decisive action. Yet Pattie chose for him.

"Talk sense into me? What, and teach riddles to the Sphinx? No, no," she peered out of the bedroom doorway, locked eyes with Jeff. "Help me get your brother's equipment out of here."

Jeff knew well enough to do as he was told, and scurried off to the bedroom. Inside, she stood in the middle of photography tumult, the eye of a hurricane in plaid pajamas. Even then, she still had the softest eyes he'd ever seen in anyone. Her arms rattled as she snatched at equipment only to throw it in another spot on the floor. Her hair was pulled back so tight that grease could have slid out from the ends like water from a wrung rag.

"You get him out of here, I've had enough of his disrespect."

"He's not doing any harm. He said himself, he just needs to get noticed."

"It's our bedroom. Our nest. We can't give him everything."

"We aren't even here at the same time when he needs it."

"I always need it. I need to know it is ours." The energy knocked out of her by his lack of understanding, she fell to the bed with a sigh. "You're being cruel, Jeff Olsavsky. Cruel. Can you

tell I'm getting mad with you?" Jeff nodded. She slapped the bed with her arms, "I know you can tell because I just addressed you by your full name."

"Give him the room," Jeff felt like a moderator in saying, "it might not even have the light he needs, he could just move on when he realizes the light's just as rotten in our bedroom as it is in every part of the house."

"Take that back. The light's great in here."

"It's the same and you know it."

"You need to come up with something nice to say about me quick, before I ask you to get the hell out."

"I'll try to say something nice."

"Okay, what."

Jeff looked her up and down, raised a hand, and dropped it like a weakly cast fishing line. He wasn't good for a quick moment. "Your hair is, uh, taut today."

Pattie couldn't take another look at him. "Well, that's it for today with you." She redoubled her clearing efforts, throwing equipment around the room with both arms flailing. "If you can't appreciate the importance of a bedroom, you don't deserve one for a while. Get out, get out, get out."

He was disappointed with himself for failing to seize the moment. Be it moderation, item running, or even remembering to thank people for birthday cards, he was always moments too slow. Back in the living room, Daniel was on the couch, switching lenses out on his presumably stolen DSLR. "Heard that. Smooth, brother. If you're hoping to sleep on this couch I've got bad news for you," he stretched his light blue boot cuts across the couch, "It's occupied."

Jeff decided to drive to the warehouse, sneak in, grab a sheet from *R52C113B17* and huddle up in a corner of surplus, the part of the warehouse they'd be clearing out tomorrow morning. Once the space was cleared, it would be as if he never slept there for the night. Distracting himself from the prospect of sleeping on the concrete floor, Jeff focused himself on the chances he'd be on a winning team tomorrow. There's three-hundred runners under his manager, himself included. A hundred and fifty teams. Of the two-hundred and ninety nine, Jeff had worked at the same time as about half of them. And of those he has worked with, he reckoned that a quarter of them were actually quick. The rest weren't much different from himself. He figured that as long as he didn't get stuck with one of those hobbled ex-high school athlete types, or—heaven forbid—one of the ex-retirees looking for some extra cash to pad their disappointing nest egg, he had a shot. Screwing up his face in the car, radio blaring the Boss, he figured he had a one in twenty seven chance of getting placed with a great runner. Jeff wasn't one to check his math. No matter who he got paired with, he thought, he'd have an opportunity to display the quick-minded part of himself he hadn't had the chance to.

Pulling up to the warehouse, he entered through the main door just like any other employee, but without checking in this time. He did not grab his paging device. He jogged over to *R52C113B17*, as though on shift, and then jogged down to surplus, the unlighted corner of the warehouse. Laying down in the furthest corner, shelves and an exterior wall on three sides, he maintained great intestinal forbearance, wrapped in a twin-sized cocoon atop a concrete bed, disorganized shelves towering above him. Feeling like a young boy wrapped up so, he fell into a light sleep.

After much sleep-wake tumult, he got up for good at eight forty-five. Fifteen minutes available before he needed to clock in. He went to the restroom, washed his face, wet his unkempt tufts of hair, and sloshed mouthwash until his gums stung. It was time to move and think fast. Well, he thought to himself, after grabbing a dispensing machine snack bar, for energy.

He clocked in, grabbed his paging device, and joined the rest of the one-hundred and forty nine present for the morning shift, all eager for a permanent spot. The general warehouse manager was in front of them, flipping through a list on a clip board, conferring with lower-level managers about configurations, start times, and surplus goals. Jeff munched the bar. The general manager wore the most professional pant-suit he'd seen. He thought about Hillary Clinton for a while. She looked up to the runners.

"Each of you will be paired to another peer. You'll see your number on your paging device momentarily. Find your partner, you'll have three minutes. Once that time is up, you will begin sorting surplus, locations assigned by paging device. If you two fail to work together, you will be disqualified from consideration for permanent employment. If you fail to perform the tasks under the maximum allowed time, your team will be disqualified from consideration. If you perform admirably and with excellent teamwork, your team will be considered. The team numbers should be showing up on your devices now."

Jeff's paging device read 61. Runners all around him began shouting their numbers, jogging and jumping in small circles to find their mate. He was about to shout his until he saw a pair of wrinkled hands holding up a piece of paper that read '61' in hasty handwriting. It was one of the ex-retirees, and though she looked sweet enough, Jeff recognized that sweetness wasn't part of the vocabulary of the competition. As the woman continued to fan her card back and

forth, searching for her pair, he walked over to the general manager. He wasn't sure if speaking to her was a violation of the rules, but he was guaranteed to lose given his circumstances anyway.

"Excuse me," she didn't hear him, or didn't acknowledge him. "Excuse me," he repeated, tapping at her clipboard.

"Yes, what? Is your paging device not working?"

"No, no it's not that. I just hoped that I could get a reassignment."

"To who? Why?"

"Well, I've been paired with an older woman, she's got one foot in the grave. I can't be dragged down by her."

Looking at the readout on his paging device, she scans the room and finds the woman with the sign. "She seems hale and hearty to me."

"No, she's not. She's holding up a sign, it's shaking. She probably only brought the sign because she couldn't shout."

"We can't switch you."

"This isn't fair. Look at the odds here," he paused, to give the impression that he was calculating on the spot, "There's a one in twenty seven chance that I'd be paired with someone so incapable. That seems rare enough that the only way this could happen is if it were rigged."

"Rigged? Please, Mr. Statistician, what are the odds I'd be talking to such a jackass today?"

Jeff stammered, screwed up his face, trying to find a variable. "Well, you're here aren't you?"

“And you’re not. Get out. You’re fired. Permanently. There you go, a permanent position. Now go on.”

“But what about my partner?”

“Like you care. We’ll probably fire her too. We paired her with you because you’re both poor performers. Don’t want to drag anyone else down with you.”

“That’s no way to operate.”

“Neither is this, considering how much of my time you’ve wasted. No more of this from you. You don’t work here anymore, remember? Please. I swear, you Illinois people are gum on my heel.”

Edible Print Cake.

Deb and I used every lighted hour to maintain the yard in preparation for the moment she and her parents were to eat a cake with my face printed on it. It took Saturday to make up for the months of landscaping neglect we inflicted through our passivity—hard labor was the only cure for overgrown hedges, fallow plant beds, and unkempt lawns.

We leased a small ranch home at the edge of downtown Richmond, with a side-wrapped porch. It was a home that tried its best to exude Southern authenticity, but still, it was a ranch. The place was good for us, and we loved it because it was ours, and because we could easily afford the rent thanks to Deb's bargaining. In exchange for reduced rent we were to maintain the property, something that the property owner didn't need to know we were unable to do. I worked long hours as a field biologist's research assistant studying the population spread of the European Mantis and she was a sociology PhD candidate at VCU. We weren't home often, and when we were, it was dark outside. But that didn't stop her from making the pledge to the renters, and I

had no choice to go along, for fear of breaking the illusion of solidarity we'd fronted towards the renters, even though it backfired completely. So far, we'd been lucky: owners had not been by to check on the property, and we had not done a single thing to maintain it. Our debts from academia were lessened in the process.

What it took for us to uphold our end of the bargain was this: I wanted to look good for her parents—they needed to know that we had it together. That's what sent me yesterday to the nearest garden and tool shop I could find, buying gloves and renting mowers and whackers and renders and shears.

I thought Deb had similar motivations when she woke me early with a slap of the brand-new padded gardening gloves, shouting a litany of “we've got to impress and survive, impress and survive,” in her chirpy, Jersey-England blend, a direct influence from her parents. Her father Richard was from Brick, New Jersey. When I first met him he told me “Please, call me Rich.” Her mother was a London girl who left them both and returned to her roots ten years after Deb's birth. The remainder of her upbringing was the fault of Rich and Noreen, another Jersey product, whose cigarette-stained growl clashed with Deb's mother's voice. Deb cultivated her mother's voice in her own to spite her father and Noreen both.

In my work, I've learned much more about the mantis than I expected to. The European Mantis was first introduced to America in 1899 as a method of pest control. With its vicious mandibles and raptorial grasping arms, the mantis and every subspecies like it could tear appropriate prey apart in its arms, feeding with merciless efficiency. And it is true that the female mantis will sometimes consume the body of the male during prolonged copulation, starting with the head.

Rare, yes, but it happens. From a biological point of view, this is an advantageous procedure: in food-poor situations, it is beneficial for the female to consume the male for resources, increasing the likelihood of survival and the propagation of genetic material.

Every bug, pest, and mite below it in the food chain was unprepared. The mantis flourished. Quickly it spread across Eastern North America.

Deb was dressed for our work: her most worn-down white tennis shoes (she wouldn't know where they came from if I asked), ripped and stained jeans (she could tell you how each rip came to be), a VCU athletics shirt, and a straw sunhat I last saw her wear on our Bald Head honeymoon, two years ago. Bleary-eyed, seeing her standing at the foot of the bed, I didn't say a thing in response, taking in the speckled late springtime light that shone through the hat, giving her freckles she'd never had before. I wanted her to come back to bed. To hell with trying to impress her parents. I married her, shouldn't that be impressive enough? But, still, I hauled myself out of bed anyway.

By ten we finished pulling the weeds. By eleven, I mowed the grass and Deb took a slow time trimming the hedges in front of the old porch. Around twelve, I mowed the patch of front lawn with the rented push mower, Deb on the front porch steps, sipping at a glass of water as though mocking me in repose. At one we had a modest lunch of triscuits and cheese, and for the rest of the useful hours we wrangled the garden beds, Deb helping equally after much nagging on my part. Planting the bulbs—Iris, Day Lily, and Daffodil—took an hour by itself because we bickered over placement. Once we agreed on our placement—an alternating triplet pattern of them in the beds—Deb went back inside to make snacks for the two of us, and quickly lost track

of time. Left with the remainder of the work, I planted the bulbs as quick as I could and spread the mulch without care. We had an hour left before her parents were to arrive, and we hadn't yet touched the interior or picked up the food. Deb offered to buy a rotisserie, mashed potatoes, and steamed greens for sides from the hot section of the nearest store, long as I cleaned up the living room and dining room. It was a deal.

Earlier that week I observed the hatching of a mantis egg attached to the low branch of a tree. Breaking open, hundreds of nymphs—orders smaller than their adult size, if they make it to maturity—clawed their way out, clamoring over each other as they stake out on their own to live solitary lives. Some were killed in the escape, trampled and consumed by siblings and family, a sentimental personification that I disregarded in the moment. But as I watched the trampled ones fall to the ground below, moving for the first and last times of their lives, I felt a pride on behalf of their sacrifice.

I reminded myself that, in real life, it shouldn't work this way. There should be as many nymphs as will grow to become adults; no more, no fewer. It would hurt less that way. But nature found it for the mantis if it created as many nymphs as it could muster, the hundreds then forced to struggle until the painless few remained. Nature felt it may be for the mantises own good to have the cruelest birth, fighting from the earliest moment of mobility and independent action.

Once Deb returned with the food we chose to shower together to save time. *Saving time*: a reason that pulled any intimacy and connection out of the moment more completely than I'd realized. She was out of her dirt-caked clothes well before me and stepped behind the curtain,

steam roiling around the edges and top of the shower. I step in right behind her, feeling the same pride at sacrifice, this time the romance of the shower extinguished so that we may survive to impress. This time with cleanliness our only end, the space felt cramped and I was struck with a puritanical feeling about her body and mine, two dirty things. She was using the loofah I bought her last year as a present for some forgotten slight. The loofah has been my perfect apology in multiple relationships: a clean, practical *mea culpa*.

I still felt injured at the dilettantish way she did her share of the yardwork, and I wanted to prod and poke at her until she promised me a loofah of my own. But I kept my mouth shut, and we bathed in silence, shifting positions under the showerhead to remove the suds.

The mantis is equipped with a single ear that hears frequencies far above human hearing, tuned to the cries of the bat, its arch predator. This frequency may not sound anything like a screech to them, for their lowest heard tones are higher than ours. Perhaps the lowest sound they hear feels just as low to them as the lowest sound we hear. Perhaps we could transpose the music we hear to the range of the mantis, just to see if they'd like it. Just a thought.

The in-law arrival was heralded by the screeching of brakes. I peeked from the bathroom blinds to see a Geo parked in the driveway, the most oxidized hunk of metal to ever grace four wheels. "Is that them?" Deb asked, toweling off in the shower basin while I brushed my teeth in front of the mirror, the susurrus of the brush calming me.

“It better not be anyone else,” I said, managing to get the words through a mouth full of mint toothpaste and spit, “else we’d be wasting our time.”

We rushed to get dressed. I slapped on a pair of my least wrinkled khakis and a slightly stained button down from work yesterday. She puts on a mid-length, flowing black dress that told everyone *really, I am put together*, though I knew it meant *I can throw this on any moment*. Downstairs, I heard them open the front door unbidden. While the creak of the door’s hinges was familiar, the sounds generated from Deb’s father and stepmother were foreign to the space. It set me on edge to hear them scrape their shoes on the threshold, and the sound of Noreen’s nails against the hollow core door alarmed me most.

“Deb? Sean? Are you two home?” It was Rich’s voice, the gruff Jersey that could be found diluted in his daughter, in purest form.

“We’re here, don’t worry!” Deb shouted back, putting on her flats before rushing out to the front door. I was tailing, again.

Rich and Noreen looked messy. Noreen was in a mismatched pantsuit, with hasty makeup marring her wrinkled but open face. Rich seemed tired standing beside her, in jeans and a Springsteen t-shirt, a white cake box in his hands.

Seeing me approach, Noreen shuffled across the floor to hug me “Seanie, Seanie! Happy birthday!”

“Thank you Noreen. How are you? How are you, Rich?”

“We’re doing, okay, considering the bankruptcy. But none of that today, it’s your birthday. How’s my daughter—you taking care of her?” He asked the same question every time.

“She’s taking care of me, sir.” I gave the same answer.

“That’s what I like to hear! You always have been a stubborn one, Deb.” And he the same reply.

“Comes from somewhere. Bankruptcy?” And she the same interjection, it was a comfort ritual. Maybe Rich didn’t realize the habit of it. Nice that Deb chose not to let that bankruptcy line just slip under the rug. Rich swatted his hand away at the question.

“Remember that investment I made for Richie and I? The development plot, out in Detroit? Well, it fell through and dragged everything involved deep under with it. I swear, it was a black hole. Nobody heard nothing until it was all gone, and then some. Few weeks later, the bank we took a loan from to make the stake in the stuff came knocking, asking for payment. Well, it’s been a year since that snowball got rolling, and we’ve declared, and we’ve got nothing. Nothing. But don’t keep listening to all this, we’ve got it sorted out. Don’t you worry about Richie and I, we’re clever ducks.”

“Okay, Noreen, okay. Sorry to pry. We’re here for Sean anyway.” Deb took the cake box from Rich’s hands and went off to the kitchen. We followed behind.

“Rich, Noreen, can I get either of you a drink?” I’m looking for a change of pace. Noreen asked for a Jack and coke, Rich a glass of red.

When Deb first took me to meet her parents three years ago, they took us to a two-Michelin star place in D.C., proud that their daughter had finally met someone she was comfortable taking home. There wasn’t anyone before me, however: Deb’s told me that if it wasn’t for my pushiness, there would still have been no one, and she would have been just fine with that. I doubt I’ll ever get the genuine answer from her. All together, we place the food on the dinner table.

The mantis molts multiple times in its life cycle, growing in size until reaching its adult form. Prior to shedding, the mantis becomes sluggish and stops eating. Then, it will find a secluded branch and hang, vulnerable to anything that happens to see it. Within hours, the mantis will molt completely, larger than before.

Rich ate only chicken. Noreen ate only the sides, “I’ve been trying out vegetarianism”, she explained. Deb and I ate everything. The chicken was dry and flaky, I could tell it had been sitting under the heating lamp for far too long. The potatoes lacked gravy. And the green beans had a robust acidity that lined the tongue and cheeks until it colored anything else you ate.

“This is a bit dry,” Rich said, always polite. “However, I can’t wait for dessert. You’ll love the cake.”

Deb, sliding the chicken and potato paste in her mouth down with a strong sip of wine, nodded in agreement. Hearing the gargantuan gulp made me want this meal over. I got up, offering to take anyone’s plate to the kitchen if they were done. Everyone handed me theirs. Noreen followed me to the kitchen.

“I’m sorry for Rich. He’s had his mind some kind of worried these days, trying to keep thing together. He hasn’t got it in him to maintain sensibilities. We’ve been living in a motel lately, you know that? A motel. We’re in our sixties.”

“That’s awful.” I threw the last of the chicken into the trash, and scraped the mashed potatoes out of the bowl.

“It’s fine. Really, it’s just fine. The terrible thing is that our friends, the ones that are left anyway, they’re all moving to the places they’re going to die in. Their final form. And us, we’re worried this is it. That’s what in him. He’s getting lonely.”

“Well please, Noreen, let Deb and I know if there’s anything we can do to help.”

“That’s kind of you, but it’s up to Rich to ask Deb. I don’t think Deb’s in a place to do much for me, even now, when I’ve been her real mother for decades.”

“Well, ask me anytime.”

“Forget it. Let’s eat cake.”

When Noreen and I returned to the dinner table, Deb and Rich were talking.

“It’s just a signature,” Rich said, gesticulating the signing motion, “we’ll be handling it. But because of the bankruptcy, we’re not allowed to do it.”

“Of course we’d do this for you,” Deb said, chipper. “We’ll do it as soon as the bank’s open.”

“That’s great to hear.”

Noreen sat down next to Rich. “So, you worked up the humility to ask, did you?”

“Yes, I did.”

“What did you ask?” I say, my talk with Noreen in mind. I felt warmth towards the bond between Deb and her father.

“Well, I asked Deb if you, as a unit, would be willing to sign for a mortgage on a house, the last one we’ll probably live in. We can’t do it, so it makes sense to get it from you two. And with your first home buyer’s benefits, it won’t be a burden at all.”

“Well, I can see your reasoning,” I said, looking at my empty dessert plate, “It might be something we can do. How much is it?”

“Nothing too extravagant, just three-hundred and eighty thousand.”

This is something we absolutely cannot do, I thought. It occurred to me that I forgot the cake knife, and took the opportunity to ask Deb to come with me to the kitchen to locate it.

“We can’t do this.”

“We have to. Where’s my dad going to live? Motel to motel to motel? In our living room? What do you want him to do?”

“Can’t he rent like the rest of us?”

“He can’t afford to rent and you know it. Look at their Geo out there. Look at it. It’s a wonder they put gas in the thing.”

“And you expect him to be able to pay a mortgage? This is going to fall on us. It’s going to kill us.”

“They’re family. They’re your family now, too.”

“They don’t have to be.”

I wished I said anything else, then. Deb, silent, opened the utility drawer and pulled out the bread knife, and walked silently to the dining room.

I followed her out and stood above the cake, still in its box. Opening it, I found a simple, squat icing-lined rectangle of vanilla cake. On the top surface of the cake, was a sugar-inked printout of my face, that either Rich or Noreen pulled from an online profile, a dead-on profile shot, pixelated from expansion and blurry from the medium.

I brought the cake over to Deb. As I put it down in front of her, I mouthed an *I'm sorry*. She mouthed a *we're doing this*. Then, she began cutting. The bread knife slipped through the inking of my hair, then forehead, then eyes, then nose, then chin.

The Oslow Dog.

Danny here has heard this before, but it's important you hear this about Oslow. Used to be, Oslow's kids and my kid were friends. Used to be after the bus dropped off my Mabel and the two Oslow kids at the corner, they would run over to my backyard, or Oslow's right next door. They'd run around and throw toys and scream and laugh and paint and climb—seven and eight year olds shaking, bouncing, and triumphant. Used to be, even though I didn't like him then and I still don't now, Oslow and I set aside our differences for the sake of his kids and my kid. They all liked each other just fine.

But then came along the Oslow dog, a pent-up Shepard pup with nil for training and no space to run. That's the root of what's all wrong with this dog, it's got no space to run. As for this particular event and the way I saw it from next door, all this happened from Oslow's carelessness.

If I'm remembering this right, back me up here Danny, my wife Charlene had just picked me up from work at the machine shop and the kids were over at the Oslow place. Normal afterschool procedure—there's supervision, snacks, the works. We'd do the same for the Oslow if he had to step out of the house too – it was just him in there, and with his wife gone he needed all the help he could get. We looked after the Oslow kids often and nothing bad happened here. Nothing but a good time, that's right. They'd have their fun and then Charlene would cut them some apple slices, but to be frank I think only my Mabel liked them. I've spotted those Oslow kids chew the stuff only to spit it out into a napkin when Charlene's looking the other way. Get that, a pair of kids who push away a plate of apple slices. I'm embarrassed for them.

But the day this business happened, it wasn't a day for apple slices. It was Oslow's day, junk food and all. I'd been home not fifteen minutes, and from inside I heard them in Oslow's yard playing tag, or catch, or fetch with the dog. Charlene and I were drinking beer, deep into a *CSI* re-run. But then I heard this real throat-mangler of a scream wailing out from next door. Up I went to the window to see what happened, but I couldn't see anything over the fence between his place and mine. So that's how I ended up having to go over there.

I jetted across his driveway through the gate and there it was: my Mabel, curled up on the ground with the smaller Oslow kid standing above her, looking real worried, and the older Oslow kid at the other end of the yard, holding the Oslow dog. Where Oslow was, I didn't know. I wondered: how'd I beat him to his own backyard? Did he even care about the screaming?

"She pushed the dog," the small Oslow kid said, before I'd even got around to asking a thing.

"Only because it tried to bite me," my Mabel cried out through the pain, strong as ever, "I just had to push it away from me!"

“No way, my dog’d never do that.” The bigger Oslow yelled from the other side of the yard.

I looked at the way my Mabel was laying there, clutching at her left leg. I saw that her jeans were ripped in spots at the calf—the Oslow dog had gotten a real firm bite on my Mabel’s leg. So I got mad at this Oslow kid for throwing my kid under the bus right off the bat, what father wouldn’t?

“I don’t care if she pushed the dog, I want you and your brother and your dog to go inside. Find your dad,” I’ll never forget how big that Oslow kid’s eyes got in the face of real authority, “And you tell him to come out, but you three stay in. Got it?” I tried to keep it direct with this kid, who was looking for a way out of this situation from the start.

It wasn’t long after the Oslow kids and dog went in that out came Oslow, looking madder than I’d seen a man before, looking to all the world like a red ball of anger and eyebrows stuffed together into a beige bowling shirt. And what’s worse, for lack of a belt he held his pants up with his hands. “Your kid hit my dog,” he hollered at me as he stomped over to the scene.

“I don’t know about that.” I didn’t, still don’t.

“My kids said your kid hit my dog.” Honest, that’s what he said to me, that pudgy cuckold.

“I don’t know about that, but I do know that whatever it was that happened, your dog bit my kid.” This gets Oslow to bend down and get a good look at Mabel’s leg, heels popping out of the back of his beat-up white sneakers.

“Go take her home then, get her bandaged up. I don’t want her crying and bleeding on my grass, not after she hit my dog.” Where were his priorities?

After what he said then with poor Mabel to hear it, I could tell the shock had worn off, and that's when she was really wailing then, a rhythmic percussion of breaths, suck-sob-wheeze-sob-sob kind of wail. I look at Oslow and I tell him some of that *train your dog better*, the *you'll never hear the last of this*, the *don't you ever let this happen again*. And guess what he said then, no answering, Danny.

"That'll happen, but only if you train your kid better."

That was enough for me then, really pushed me over the edge to hear him say that. Without a conscious thought, I wailed him right in the face and he went down hard. I did it for Mabel's sake, I think. Before he could get back up I took my bleeding Mabel up in my arms and headed out, kicking open the gate with my foot.

"My dog bites your kid, you hit me," Oslow's yelling to me, "Makes us square." At the time that sounded fair.

All this, on a school day.

At home, I sat Mabel down on top of the toilet seat lid, dabbing at the bite with a rag soaked in rubbing alcohol. She was really letting the tears fly then, and I don't blame her, the way that must have stung as it seeped into those deep marks. I asked Charlene to bring my Mabel a little bowl of mint chocolate chip, her favorite, but the poor kid wasn't having any of it. By the time I finished dabbing at the bite, the bowl was half melted.

So, I figure I've sanitized the situation and I'm no good at stitching, so it's about time to get Mabel to the emergency room. I wrapped a bath towel around the wound and tie it off tight and we got in Charlene's old Buick and bounced on loose shocks the three miles over to the hospital, each jiggle and divot in the road sending jolts of pain through my Mabel's leg.

So there we are in waiting room with blood dripping down her leg from beneath the bath towel. The rows of plastic seats were cleaner than a fresh pack of gum and the whole place smelled of disinfectant. There was Mabel, jaw clenched from the pain, bleeding away and yet even that early in the day—six hours before the knife and bullet cases were going to get carted in—the nurses and doctors and waiting room clerks make me take a number behind all the homeless and uninsured. The people with numbers that got called before to me, I gotta say, these guys didn't look like they needed much more than their next scrip for oxy. One of them came in because of a flat foot, I heard him tell a doctor. A flat foot and that guy gets cared for, first thing. These docs and nurses, I doubt any of them have kids or they'd have seen to my Mabel right away and let these hopeless others rot.

That's the rub of it, me fuming there, really steaming about the injustice of the room with a number in my hand, a number that may as well have meant *hurry up and wait, bucko*. Mabel was sitting there, paler than normal and forehead slick with sweat, bleeding from four puncture wounds, bleeding right on through the towel and through her jeans, jeans her mother bought for her two years ago. She's grown in those two years, I can tell because her ankles stretched out far below the hems. This got me thinking about what this incident will do to the way she grows up from there on out. I got real mad at Oslow again, madder than I'd been before, get to feeling like I want to wail on him again, but I know I've had my whack. Was this incident going to screw up her leg? Mess with her head?

I worried if, when she grew all the way up, this incident would keep her from being a dog person.

Finally a nurse saw her, leading us down some mess of hallways, and in a passing room I saw the flat footed guy waiting, his feet kicked up on a pair of stirrups as though he was waiting

for a pap smear, wasting everyone's time with his legs kicked up like that. I swear he had beautiful curves in his feet, a pair of golden arches under those legs. The nurse guides us right past without saying a word and finally we're in a room of our own. That led to me sitting on a stool in the corner, with nothing to do again while the the nurse did his job. At that point I felt much better than I did in the waiting room because I could see he was doing a good job stitching her up. He took the time to ask her what color she would want for the stitch thread. She picked red. Some good customer service, right Danny?

Finished with his work, he held Mabel's hand and promised her a little candy if she'd wait a little while he speaks to me outside. Even then, still aching from the bite and the stitches, my tough Mabel accepted the deal with a grin.

Outside the room, the nurse asked me to wait by the door while he gets another staff member, some public health type. He went off and came back with this therapeutic-looking social worker, a woman wrapped up in a sweater and given the authority to handle parent-child issues in the hospital. Why a hospital would think it needs some kind of kid police, I'll never know. She starts asking me questions about the safety of Mabel's living situation. Questions like if we have guns, gun safes, power tools, and—this one really got to me—if I ever hit my kid.

We left the hospital feeling real low, my Mabel looking sour in her clean and fancy bandages, really just mad that the nurse never got her the candy he promised. So at that point I felt deputized. This social worker had said to me to make sure it doesn't happen again. I kept imagining what-ifs, how-tos, grim hypotheticals. What if that Oslow dog bit Mabel somewhere else? What if it really sunk its teeth in? Does that Oslow dog have a jaw strong enough to rip off a leg, my Mabel's leg? That was a thought I had to get away from quick. I wonder how to get the dog away from situations where it can cause harm. I needed a way to ensure that this Oslow dog

can't hurt another kid, and before getting uppity with me on this, know that I never thought once about killing this dog. The Oslow dog's just being itself. Only I'd rather it went and was itself somewhere else.

I've never had a dog and didn't know how to control one, so I met up with my younger brother Danny here and got his advice about the situation. Yes, we met up for lunch during our breaks. Hot dogs? Wait, wait, now, Danny, let me do the talking. Danny's got three dogs, from small to large, and he knows things about keeping them under control. My brother liked to watch National Geographic and learned all the time. He walked them twice a day and ran them on weekends. He taught them tricks and fed them diced meats so good I've thought about taking a bite on more than one occasion, just to see if it was worth the extra cash.

I got him up to speed on the Oslow dog's sins, and told him that we should save it from itself. So Danny thinks on it for a moment and laid out the options.

"There's different ways to go about this kind of thing. You could call animal control and let them take care of it, but it makes a big fuss in the neighborhood to call those guys on someone else. People *will* blackball you," Danny here, his eyes widened big, "People will think that you like to muck around in other's business."

I knew that wasn't the image I wanted, we'd only been in the neighborhood a year or two then and I had no intention of moving Mabel to another school any time soon. "Is there a way we can get this dog outta here, you and I?"

"Yeah, yeah we could," I could see his cogs turning around in his noggin, "We could take that dog a county over and drop it off at a sheep farm. They're made for herding. It'll be the best solution for everyone."

So I got to thinking about what Oslow's kids will make of this dog relocation business. I get to thinking about what they'll do when they discover the dog's gone who knows where. Just maybe Oslow would have to talk to them about some real heavy topics, some of that *kids, sit down* talk. I can see them huddling up in Oslow's messy living room on their couches, the ones all stained up with Oslow's kid's messy drinks. Those kids never slowed down for nothing, spilling everything nearly all the time. Oslow might say "It seems the dog's passed away," because he'd think it'll give them better closure that way, but really he'd take that route because he knows he doesn't have the answers to the questions that the kids will ask if they think the dog's alive.

Those Oslow kids haven't experienced death before, not even the thought of it. This dog was their first pet, far as I know. But my Mabel, poor thing, she has seen death. When her goldfish died she was even-keeled—one day she walked into her room and the fish was on its side, drifting against the grain at the bottom of the tank. They don't float to the top when they die, not always. So I had to have that talk with her, and she took it just fine, she understood. She took it better than I did when I was a kid. That's right Danny, I cried and cried when our cat was mowed down by a car. It's time those Oslow kids had that conversation.

But what if Oslow were to take the coward's route and said the dog's gone out to the farm, and if he did that he wouldn't even know how right he'd be. That's the best part, I think. I'd be making Oslow right by taking their dog out there.

And another thing, those Oslow kids had no respect for faith and tradition, I know because I've seen them nodding off at church. That's never something I'd let my Mabel do, I've shown her that staying awake was better than what'd I do if I caught her nodding off. So my kid, she just fidgeted there, an energetic angel. My angel, that's her, shaking away in the pew so she

can take everything the pastor says right in. And I just know that if she asks me why the Oslow kids get to sleep in church but she don't, I've got a good answer prepared: "That's the kind of man Oslow is," I'd say. I always imagine I'd be patting her on the back, letting the *kind of man* line sink in. "He's lost," I'd explain, "but he doesn't know it. He's gonna get his kids lost too if he doesn't wake them up." An answer like that would show Mabel what Oslow is, and it'll get her wondering what kind of man her own old man is, see. Her old man's not lost, her old man knows where he's going.

So it was clear to me: this was the way to go. Danny agreed show up at three in the morning, parking a block over with some of his dog food. Then we'd sneak into the yard at three in the morning and we'd leash up the dog and walk it out to his car, put it in the back seat, and off we go to relocate it. It deserved better, and we'd get it there.

I convinced my brother that he was the one who needed to leash up the dog, him being better with dogs and all, while I make sure the area was secure. Here's how he worked it out: He opened the gate real slow, not a squeak, and I followed right behind him, looking all around for signs of Oslow movements. He found his way over to the doghouse, the poor Oslow dog sleeping heavy. That's right Danny, sleeping the way puppies do, yessir. He sat down a bowl of that nice food, right there in front of its nose. Smell woke it up from its sleep, and it munched away at the grub. While munching, my brother slipped the clip of the leash around its collar, and that was that.

But get this: the dog wouldn't budge. Seemed it was just fine right where it was, or it was too scared to go somewhere better, just in case it might end up being worse. That's what I think it was that made that Oslow dog tug against my brother's leash—fear of the unknown. My brother, bless him, he kneeled down in front of the Oslow dog and know what he said?

“It’s okay,” petting so gentle at its head, cooing, “Sometimes we have to do things we don’t want to do.”

And do you know what that Oslow dog did? It got up, followed behind my brother and hopped right into the back seat of his SUV, as though it was in on the plan all along, as though we were its chauffeur. It spread on out in the backseat, looking like it didn’t have a doubt in its mind about the two of us. This dog’s got nothing wrong with him, I thought, only thing wrong was that Oslow had put it in a tough spot where it couldn’t be itself.

So we’re driving on and on and on, dog all laid out along the back seat, till we left the city limits, when white picket changed over to electric wire and boxy field fencing. We drove till we found a farm that felt like it might have a few sheep, till we found a farm that would have something the Oslow dog might like herding. Not ten minutes of this and we found one that might fit our needs, having noticed a few tufts of white hair along one of the fence junctions. Really felt like wool. There’s sheep here? Yes? Might be useful to have this dog around.

My brother got the Oslow dog out from the seat and coaxed it through a gap in the fencing. He slipped in the mud, and the Oslow dog thought Danny must have wanted to play, because it jumped all around him like he was a new friend. But Danny calmed it down with smart positioned pats on the head and side till it stopped long enough for Danny to put out a bit more of the food so he could get back to the SUV without it following behind. Satisfied that it would stay put long enough to make our leave, he came back to the car with muddied shoes and legs, though he didn’t know it, and did a real number to his own upholstery.

We got home smooth enough, Danny dropping me off a block over again, just in case the lights and the engines were to wake anyone up at my house or Oslow’s. I went inside through the front door since it’s always been the quietest. The lights were all off and I used the light of my

phone to keep from stepping on any of my Mabel's toys on the way to the couch. I figured I'm better off sleeping the rest of the night there, what with the risk of waking Charlene. She could make a real ruckus when she gets woken against her will.

The next day wasn't much different. Oslow practically pushes his kids out the door to meet with my Mabel and then they walk together to the bus stop, leaving long before I have to get on to work. Oslow's outside, watching the kids head down the block. I waited there at the window in the living room, satisfied in knowing that no Oslow dog was gonna get heard. Next in the Oslow routine was to let the dog out for a walk, and I was just waiting to see Oslow go to his backyard to get it. I was just waiting to see that Oslow yell and scream and put up flyers in the neighborhood, flyers that will only prove useful the next town over. But then there was the Oslow dog strutting down the opposite side of the street from the kids, looking to all the world like it had had the best walk of its life.

My Potbellied Popeye.

We heard about the rooftop gala through a friend of a friend. We went for valuables and a chance to rip a few people off and get some cash for the kid due soon. Neither of us were ready, but we goaded the other into saying we were. We'd put on our best: her in a black dress that hid stains well and concealed her second-trimester belly even better, me in a lining-less blazer and baggy khakis; a couple, unprepared. We hoped we looked just enough in-place that nobody batted an eye, likely we were out-of-place that plenty raised a brow. We looked young enough to be a family guest—maybe someone's grown, adult children with a kid of their own on the way, a wholesome thought. But we were more intimidating than that. Ava's arms were big around as my thighs, and she was my Potbellied Popeye.

In the initial hours of our stay we raided the catering van for valuables, hiding small goods away in the coat check. We enjoyed the food and the drink, trying our best to adopt the affectations of the rest of the patrons and go unnoticed. Ava clutched a champagne glass with her fist and I held a beer, and we were actively ignored outright by most of the people here. They were professionals and executives, the rich and hardworking. To us, it looked like they had everything. Everything was: homes and cars and insurance and friends and watches and food whenever and loans and savings. A live band played subdued songs. The sky above glowed with the light of the city, a hazed dome without a star in view. It took fifteen dollars to get from our place to this roof by cab. My toes felt tight in the patent-leather I'd inherited from my father.

After a few hours of low-level filching, Ava and I got on to casual betting with the guests of the party, a game Ava liked to do that satisfied her want of risk and might just fill our empty wallets. She had a knack for making bets that came out in her favor, bets that were on small events that passed by our peripheries, properties that had a chance of being one way or another. The color of the pants of the next person who walked on the street, for example. Whether or not the next passing car would be black or red. If some lady would tip that busking guitar player. She watched people so often that she knew what bets to make and what bets to take.

We attracted interest by pretending to make bets between us, acting over the top like gamblers at the blackjack table in some Vegas movie-montage. If you were far away, it'd look like we were exchanging substantial sums of money, right there. Pretty quickly we pulled aside a slick young man in a white suit, his uncle in a tweed jacket, and a pant-suited ad exec to the join us at the edge, and we started taking bets on anything we could see below. I drew their attention to a woman walking her dog below, "Do you think that she'll tug the dog's collar at any point

along the block?” The dog walked briskly ahead of the woman and she barely kept pace with its light trot. We put bills out on the cocktail table beside us, and waited for an outcome.

My money was on the woman tugging the dog, there was no way that animal would want to leave behind the gyro stand three quarters of the way along the block once it gets a sniff in passing. We’re all watching hawk-eyed, one fist in front of our mouth as though stifling ourselves to keep from ruining the outcome. I wonder if the woman and the dog had any sense that they’d become so important. Arriving at the stand, the dog sniffed all around, smelling meat splatter, and the leash between it and the woman slackened and fell to the sidewalk. The woman caught up with it, even. She kept walking on. The dog continued to sniff the edges of the cart, the woman feet ahead, tugging away at fido.

“Hot day! You got it,” Ava hollered and took a sip from her glass.

The man in tweed made the next bet: the next police car we see will be heading westward on the street below, two-to-one. Everyone was in. The ad-exec went to the east edge of the roof, as though the advance information will help her chances either way.

While waiting for the outcome to arrive, Ava sensed the need to create a more immediate bet. She pointed to a man and two girls in the crowd at a bus stop. The man was wearing a brown top coat and jeans and had the defensive look of a father, scanning around him and back down to his children in constantly moving surveillance. He looked exhausted. One of the girls was much shorter than the other, in a pink raincoat and cartoon-floral rain boots, stomping on a newspaper likely for want of a puddle. The taller one wore a red and brown sweater big enough to swallow her hands, neck, and most of her pants. She seemed calm standing there between the guarded father and the bouncing sister, seeming like she was beyond the two of them. “Any bets?” Ava asked, turning to the gamblers.

“I’ll bet they don’t all manage to make it on the bus. Ten to one,” said the white-suited man, twisting the strap of his watch back and forth. Ava and the other three took it, readied for some low return winnings.

A police car turns right onto the street from the block over, heading east, and coming to a stop below us in the traffic. “Now look, he just turned on the road. He could have been going anywhere, who’s to say he doesn’t turn left the next block and start going West,” the tweed man says, hands pointing east and west and then south and north, “We’re not cops. We don’t know how they patrol.”

Ava, ready to get the payout, pushed him closer to the overhang. “Cop’s heading east, bucko.”

“All’s I’m saying, we haven’t got an answer quite yet,” the tweed man’s arms held the roof wall and maintained his balance. Ava pushed him again, this time at the top of his chest, with more of her weight behind her. The upper half of his body leaned out over the roof, bent over enough that his pocket-square fell from him and drifted off to the street, a paisley swath of red falling away. “You lost, buddy.”

“Get off it, this isn’t even a big bet for you. Now pay up,” the white-suit grabbed his arm and righted him. The tweed man was red in the face and ready to talk. “And you better not push this woman for knocking some sense into you,” the white-suit interjected.

Weeks before, we left our apartment when we went to visit my hometown. Vermin filled our building, a constant issue—hearing their scurries behind the walls, between the ceiling and floor above us, and below us running around. By the curdled milk in bowls in our sink, we’d find droppings around the nibbled edges. They were everywhere, at all times. Right before we left, though, we found a dead one. Smack dab in the middle of the apartment it was legs up, like a

prop. It was enough to make me want to move away. I told her we could leave a warning with this one, something the other rats would understand, so they might leave our things alone while we were gone. Jumping on the idea, Ava went to the super's storage room and came back with a cinderblock and an oversized trash bag. She put the rat on top of the bag and with both arms brought the cinderblock down on its body—smashed it right there so that the head still hung out beyond the edge. Some of its blood had slipped over the edge of the bag, pooling around the floor slats. “The splatter gives ‘em a stronger message,” she said. When we came back the next week, we found the block turned over, the rat eaten completely from tail to teeth, all that was left was bone and gristle. Could only figure the rest of the rats saw the block as a puzzle with the prize beneath. It was enough that I wanted to run clear out. This time, I did. I excuse myself from the betting and look for the exit.

When I made it to the street, they were still there, the father on one knee, his left hand on the shoulder of the older child and his right hand the younger. The bus was pulling up before them. I ran half a block over, wheezing with my dress shoes too tight, the smell of gyros and traffic surrounding me.

I heard the father, “We haven’t ridden the bus this late,” he looked at them with a clawing tenderness, he looked like he didn’t want to see a bad thing in the world happen to them, “the rules are important this time. Do you remember them?”

“Yes, dad. How long are we going to ride today?” The young one was talking and spinning in place. “They smell and the seats hurt and the driver always gives me a real sour look and I can’t stand a thing about it.”

“It’ll be over before you know it. Once it’s over we’ll be at Karen’s.”

“What if I stayed right here? What if we went over there? Can’t I stay with you?”

I stood behind them, trying my hardest to look like everyone else at the stop, hands in my pocket, shaking beneath my cheap suit. The older sister was checking her phone, removed from her father's scrutiny. At the roof above, I saw that the three were still looking down, maybe making a bet on me.

"Not this weekend, honey. Now tell me the rules."

"One, never let go of your hands when we get on or off the bus. Two, if I get left behind, don't go anywhere, stay right there, glued dead to the spot!"

"That's right, that's right. Now it's time to move, I'll let you sit on my lap. That's a little more comfortable, isn't it?"

The bus stopped in front of us, brakes screamed, and hydraulic doors opened and groaned. The bus rocked towards us as the mass of passengers exited. Yet still, as the crowd left, the bus still appeared full. The father tugged at the sleeve of the older girl to get her attention, she pocketed her phone, and they boarded. The young girl continued to spin, and spin and the doors closed. The bus drove off, and the girl's eyes grew wet. I put my hand on the girl's shoulder. I wasn't shaking anymore. I saw the father inside smack his hand against the glass, yelling, as the bus drove off. He looked caged.

I asked her if she was supposed to be on that bus and the girl stomped a booted foot. "I didn't want to ride that stinky bus. Smelly, stinky, icky, messy dusty thing. No sir, not me."

Nearly every single weekday of my childhood, my father would play a simple game with me. As he left the house, long before I was off to school but late enough that I was awake and eating a sugared breakfast, he'd kiss my mother on the forehead in the same spot with mechanistic regularity. I could always hear the *pop* of the kiss – the kiss itself was light but theatrical, one that I understand was for neither my mother nor my father's benefit but for mine.

Then he would find wherever I was in the house, planning his path to suit the game so that he could walk by me silently. I always knew he'd be about to do it when the footsteps stopped, but the front door wasn't yet opened and closed. I'd get my acting chops ready for him. My father would then walk right by me as though he was on his way to some big deal, and as he passed he'd raise an arm right above my head, fingers snapping open and stretching out as far as he could. The hand would lift up, fingers closing like a jellyfish propelling itself, or a rope going taut. In my chair, I'd collapse limp, a play-dead as convincing as a marionette without a controller. Sometimes I'd even drop my spoon. Our game completed, he'd leave. This was our morning greeting.

Scanning my head around like this girl's father, I notice some of the people at the stop are looking our way, still forming a judgement about whether or not I should be with this child. I saw on the roof above three silhouettes leaning over, arms flailing. Imitative of her father, I take a knee and adopt a scanning look. It might just be me, but I felt more relaxed this way.

"Why didn't you listen to your dad?" I poked her shoulder like it's a joke.

"It's just a bus." She crossed her arms and wouldn't look me in the eyes, her cheeks ruddy with fear.

"You shoulda listened to him. Don't you ever do that," I waved my hands in front of her face, "Aren't you scared?" She let out a mumur of affirmation and I started shaking her. "This isn't some game here—do you think your dad told you to do all that stuff just because he's a huge dork? Just because he wants you to ride a stinky bus?" The people at the bus stop take a step back, they seemed to think I had the situation under control. An old woman on my periphery nodded. She held her cane by the shaft and shook it in the air, as though encouraging and

suggesting something more corporal in punishment. Boots pointed inward, body folded inwards in discomfort, the kid looks up at me.

“Dad will come back. I just have to wait. It’s not my fault.”

“It *is* your fault. Everything is everyone’s fault. It just takes a single misstep for someone to crash into your state of goddamn being and wreck it to bits.”

“It’s just a bus,” she whispered in a choked voice, “I didn’t do anything wrong, I didn’t do anything.”

“The bus doesn’t have a goddamn thing to do with it, kid.” The old woman purses her lips at the curse. “Your dad wanted you to ride that bus and follow his rules because the world is a mean place, with mean people and death and cruel intentions. People hurt each other. People *die*.” I notice that an audience is forming around us, in a loose circle, every single person watching indirectly, taking it in but not getting involved. She stared at the ground, tears dropping from her and splashing onto the glistening sheen of her rain boots.

“All sorts of sad things happen to good people and they didn’t deserve it and they can’t predict it and so many people couldn’t give two shits about anyone else’s misery because they’re too busy with their own. You should be thankful I’m talking to you right now,” I wanted her to look me in my frantic eyes, so I shook her until she looked up, “you should be glad it’s me talking to you right now, not any of these other schlubs who don’t know a thing, don’t know a thing at all.”

“Are you,” she said, not ready to look me in the eye, just looking at my nose, “are you a mean one?”

“It doesn’t matter if I am. I could hurt you right now before anyone around us could stop it. That’s why you get on the bus. That’s why you listen.”

She sat down and put her head in her hands, folded up there in the trash and spent gum. I saw the father yelling and running towards us, the older daughter in tow. The two must have sprinted back here from a stop down the line. I imagined the way they fought to get off the bus, shoving passengers out of the way, passengers who would have had no idea why a father and his daughter were being so rude—what's the rush.

And they were coming quick. I looked up and nobody was looking over the roof anymore. The father was at the other end of the block, and right then Ava and the suits threw the doors of their building open, running toward me, too. Equally far, I wondered to myself who might get here first.

I let my right hand place a bet with my left—right had its money on the father and daughter. The left hand, well, it was certain Ava'd make it to me long before anyone else.

The Bus That Ensured a Career.

The bus I drove was full of kids who stayed onboard because they couldn't yet choose the job they'd take. Stragglers. Outside, whole industries came and went before a kid made a decision. Youngest at ten, oldest at fifteen, each had an entire lifetime ahead of them, a lifetime that would be informed completely by their answer to the question *where will you work?* Youngest at ten, oldest at fifteen, each had an entire lifetime ahead of them, a lifetime informed completely by their answer to that question. And we were all fortunate enough to live in a society that figured out a way to get even time herself to wait while they made their decision.

We moved that fast; relativity and whatnot. In most places, I got my own express lane. That's where I really got to let the throttle out.

But these kids adjust their preferences and goals and find the most comfortable choice for them. And then off the bus they go, starting some career. No experience needed, just a desire to learn. Maybe some new kids boarded, if there were any young ones nearby. It has been this way a long time. I couldn't tell for sure how many decades passed on this shift alone. But things were stable out there. Stable, because the people got together and recognized the importance of giving tomorrow's adults the time to figure out exactly what kind of adult they should become.

There were new and different jobs and different choices, but the way the kids decided hasn't changed much. I saw them in the convex mirror to the left of my rearview, bracketed to the bus's ceiling. At one time or another each has had that screwed up little face, struggle externalized, and they were too young to know to hide it away. I could tell they might just get off the bus because they wanted off, away from the necessity of choice, not because they want to do a job. And I think some of them do get off because they didn't want to decide. They never admitted it, because if they tried to leave without making a choice I wouldn't have let them take a single step out of the vehicle. But there were children who took half-measures, choosing whatever was nearby because it was less taxing than waiting for the right choice for them. Nobody excitedly got off the bus to work a terminal in an oil processing facility. Then again, who do I think I am to play skeptic with Isabella, now helping machinery trim salt at the edge of the Dead Sea? She did tell me she wanted to work with her hands. She did tell me that she valued a good seasoning.

Every seat save for mine—the luxuriously cushioned, hydraulically-equipped driver's seat—was built for the average kid. They were non-adjustable lightly cushioned hardback repeating to the rear of the cabin. When I started this job I imagined the shape of the average kid from the configuration of the seating. They must have two-and-a-half foot legs so that they could

plant their feet on the floor, twig-like arms meant for resting on toothpick-wide articulated armrests, slim and elongated torsos that fit the height and width of the seats, and waffle-iron indentations along the backs of their skulls to properly lock into the odd corrugated headrests.

But once the first round of kids boarded, I saw that none of them fit my visualization, and instead each of them was, on average, somewhat comfortable in their chairs. Jenny couldn't touch the floor but loved how the armrests didn't dig into her elbows. Robert slid around in his seat, unable to properly secure himself with the belt, but he could at least hold still by pushing his feet firm against the floor. And Dwayne was the closest to average yet, comfortable almost everywhere but the small of his back. This caused him to fidget constantly, striving to determine the way he was meant to be sitting.

This current group of kids stretched my patience thin. I had a quota to meet, a required number of careers commenced by my good-driving hand. And their straggling indecision may cause me to fail. They'd ruminated themselves sour, letting time zip by while they weighed socio-economic pros and cons until their heads spun. The most worrying was Camille, sitting up at the front, catty-corner to my seat. She kept on looking at me all doe-eyed. She'd only talk to the others when they'd ask what she wanted to do, and she'd only say "To be right here." And then she'd look over at me. Now, it was not part of my job description to influence the choices a kid made. Someone like Camille was a sticky situation. Any influence would likely muddy her thinking further. So I let her keep saying that. Every kid needed to come to his or her answer independently.

Leaves plummeted to the ground outside the bus, our relative speed making the whole world appear to be on fast-forward. Branches were bare for a time. Then they budded all over

again. I've seen every plant that blooms, sheds, rots, and pollinates. And I haven't stepped off the bus to get a good luck at any of them.

Ezra knew he wanted off soon. He was sly and small with uncontrollable blond hair and a mouth that stumbled over polysyllabics. We were passing through what was left of steel manufacturing in this country. "I value the means of prod-uck-shun," he stepped across *production* like cracks in a sidewalk, "and I think I could run a place like this better than anyone on the bus right now." Most of the others were steamed. A few in the back yelled up towards Ezra, shouting that he doesn't know a thing about managing a continuous-output high yield operation, that he couldn't find the margins in his own notebook let alone in a perfectly competitive market.

Still looking at the road, I suspected insincerity in his voice. "Do you not like it here, Ezra? Because, and I've known you for a while now, you've been on the bus for ages. I think you might be better suited for something more white collar."

"I said I want to own it, not work inside it."

"You know you'd have to work there for years before you could even be in consideration for that, right?" I wanted to keep his expectations realistic.

"I was reading about Mr. Carn eggy and I've decided I want to be like him," he leaned against the grab bar behind my seat, his voice leveling out. "I have a spark and I will do it."

I told him that I appreciated his ambition, and I really did on account of strong will and knowledge of history. So I pulled the bus out of my lane, and came to a stop near the steel plant, time outside coming to match ours within. Near the plant a viscous, byproduct-textured river ran away. I looked on as Ezra walked in the direction of the plant, following the side of the road. He seemed confident.

I pulled a lever and the accordion door slid closed along its track. Camille told me that Ezra was helped because of me.

“Me?”

“You gave him the confidence to pursue his goal. That means so much.”

“He had it in him.”

“No he didn’t. But you do. You’re wonderful, you know that?”

Ignoring Camille’s question, I found my way back to the main road and returned to my special high-speed lane. Murmurs echoed up to the driver’s seat. A few of the kids mocked Ezra’s choice even still. This too wasn’t new. The pattern: one kid had a bright idea and the rest—the jealous ones who didn’t have it first—got testy. I tried my best to stay out of it, only quieting them down as we returned to full speed.

In the middle of the bus, Jean and Olson started on about whether or not there should be markets in organ donations. A mean and clever kid, she liked to spin new economic roles for herself, testing them on others around. She’d been onboard for so long and was so wracked with indecision that her parents have likely died since she stepped on board. Once she chooses a career she’ll find herself completely alone.

Jean was trying hard to persuade Olson: “Since personal profit and everybody else’s welfare are both improved by being allow to sell organs, there is no reason not to let people do it.” Olsen was convinced that the only reason Jean was bringing it up is because she recently discovered that nearly everyone on Earth gets born with an extra kidney.

“You’re really stretching to find your niche in this world,” Olsen told her with serious doubt in his voice. “I’d like to keep my kidneys. What if I need both of them later on?”

Jean was getting frustrated. “You can sit here and shoot me down all you want, but I don’t see you having any idea of what you’ll be doing when you get off the bus.”

“I’ve already got that figured out, thank you kindly.” Knowing Olsen, he meant it.

“And what is your job, then?”

“Arbitrage,” he told her. The rest of the bus was lukewarm on these jobs. High on function, low on purpose. The same went for realtors. Nobody on the bus envied them if they picked something like that.

“The middlemen of monies. Great. You’re a real inspiration, Olsen.”

Whenever one of the kids gets an idea together that is somewhat unpopular, or even mocked, I try to stand in on their behalf. I thought, *it’s a dirty job*, etcetera. “You know, Jean, someone has to navigate the tumultuous economic borderlines between currencies. He’s not a middleman, he’d be a moderator.”

Olsen perked up, bolstered by my defense. “It is necessary for economic agents to capitalize on asymmetric economic information. There’s no sin in being paid for taking the time to know what others aren’t willing to take the time to know themselves.”

Jean agreed that she certainly wasn’t willing to learn about it. She started to draw a parallel between arbitrage and organ markets, trying to elevate Olson.

We were hours away from passing the central stock and money markets, in time for Olsen to leave the bus and start his career. I rerouted into a direct path to the markets without telling anyone. It was my mandate to be beholden to the whims of those onboard and to announce this at my discretion. But in order to maintain respect, I haven’t told them how closely I followed their wants. If they knew that I’d change the direction of the bus the moment a kid made a strong claim about a job, they’d all shout about wanting to be chimney sweeps and

zookeepers and deep-sea drillers, just to test me. But really, I wanted the best for them. How else were they going to end up in the right job for them? And how else was I going to meet my quota?

Weaving through the narrow corridors of the older urban network, I slowed the bus to a speed nearer to the world around and parked across from the nation's central trading hub. He'd find a nice place to take up an apprenticeship here. It wasn't often that a kid got off the bus to work arbitrage, so I let myself look around, the gleaming marble architecture of high finance impressive in every direction.

Leaving town and regaining speed, I reminded the kids that if they were hungry that they were welcome to grab a nutritional bar from beneath their seat. These were hard, dry bars that were entirely sufficient for their needs.

Amidst the crunches of nutritional satisfaction, I could hear a kid sobbing. I searched for the up-down shake of the shoulders, the head in hands, the glistening streak of a tear along a cheek, but I couldn't find anything that fit the signs I'd come to know. I figured that the crying was coming from a kid hiding behind the seat in front of him or her. I asked Jean to rut the crier out. She gladly embarked on the hunt, as I expected her to. That's why I picked her.

Relieved someone was on the task, I returned my attention to driving. Outside it must have been raining, the road glistening as we sliced through the droplets. Then the shine ceased and the pavement returned to a dull, dry grey. Another storm passed through in span of seconds. I could see Jean snapping her head around each aisle as she headed to the rear of the bus, others

pretending to ignore her but visibly anxious by her proximity as they continued their discussions with nearby passengers.

The crying continued. Having made it to the rear and finding nothing, Jean ran to the front of the bus to start searching there. And there on the floor below the front seat, she found Camille. Pulling her up by the arm, Jean dragged Camille back into her seat. I was alarmed by her severity.

“Jean you needn’t be so rough, you could have just asked her to stand up and talk to me.”

“I wasn’t sure if she’d be non-compliant. What would you have had to offer her, this crying girl who’s distracting us from finding purpose and comfort?” She let go of Camille’s arm. Camille’s tangle of black hair was matted around flushed cheeks, cheeks stained with salt tracks of tears. I tried to console her.

“Camille, Camille, why are you crying? I thought you were spending your time there really deliberating,” I waved a hand above my head, “really thinking about your future.”

She looked embarrassed. “I, well, I’m not sure I’m able to explain anything unless you tell Jean to go to the rear of the bus.”

“Jean, please.” Frustrated, Jean marched to the rear. “Now, what is it?” Kids near the front seats leaned in. None of them had seen anyone cry on the bus before.

Camille whispered, “I think I love you.”

“You love me?”

“Yes.”

“That’s very sweet,” I looked at the road, trying to appear fully occupied. “But why would that make you cry?”

“Because I don’t want to leave the bus. I don’t want to go out and do a job or participate—I want to be in love with you. You help people find their way, and that’s beautiful.”

“Well, there’s nothing to be done about love in here, you know?” I tried to make light, “Besides, I know nothing about you! And each of you help yourselves, I’ve got nothing to do with the direction they choose.”

“You have everything to do with it. So I know I love you and I think you should love me.”

I’d seen kids stubborn about manufacturing processes, infrastructural administration, and even—bless them—operational management practices, but I’d never seen a kid do this. I decided to take a different tack. “Even if I did love you, Camille, you’re much too young. You’d have to go out into the world and do something with your time before you’re anywhere near my age.” Her eyes brightened up.

“Do you think I could get back on after I do?” she asked.

“Well, yes, if the timing’s right.” I had no idea if that was allowed.

She found the answer she needed. “Let me off here,” she told me, with newfound resolve. We were passing through a sprawling metropolitan area, winding along an outer metro loop. It would be hard to do much of anything here. There wasn’t much around, save for heavy industry and mechanic’s garages. It would be difficult for her.

“Are you sure?” But then I thought about my quota. I thought about the rest of the kids on the bus. I thought that if she was off the bus that I would get closer to my quota and the rest of the kids would have things go back to normal.

“Yes.”

I decelerated faster than usual. I pulled over. I opened the accordion again, and out went Camille. She waved the whole time we drove away, the speed of her wave increasing, though I knew that she was waving her arm just the same.

The kids were furious. Mitchell, a middle of the road passenger who couldn't decide between construction and logging, shouted up to me: "She's playing you! I don't know what she wants but it isn't love!" More kids joined in. *You fool. She's a liar and so are you. The only motivation for anyone is self-interest. We're not choosing for ourselves, and who are you to act like that's what we're doing at all,* and so on. For hours.

A faction formed, those kids who dissented. They felt that if Camille could get off the bus for a reason other than to work a job, they didn't understand why they still have to. I'd agree with them, and I'd let them off right then—but that's not my job.

They grew rowdier, screaming for a more nuanced understanding of fulfillment and purpose. They ate as many of the nutritional bars as they liked. They threw handfuls of dry crumbs at one another. They refused to sit in their seats.

They talked about love. They demanded from each other a good reason to talk nice. They talked nice. They became friends. In their friendship, they found a better way to distrust me, the bus driver, the only reason they were stuck onboard. They wanted me to pull over. I told them that it wouldn't happen by my lights. Outside, it was dark and barren. We were in between cities. To get their attention, I honked the horn.

"Look outside. Look where we are. If you rebels want to get off and do things differently, you're welcome to. You could get out right now if you want. Prove your mettle. Prove that what you want will get you what you need." I open the accordion doors. A dry heat whips into the bus, blowing in dust and dim. But the rebels didn't care.

They poured out in shouts and yells. Hoping the dire climate would have taken the fight out of them, I shouted down: “There’s nothing out here for you!” It seemed the kids didn’t give a damn about the rough climate. “Get back in the bus! I will leave you here!”

They responded by picking up rocks from the roadside and hurled them at the bus, denting metal and shattering glass. Through the broken panes, they screamed to the remaining kids on the bus. They warned them against the danger of their path, they invited the rest to join them in the desert, away from me and the choice I demanded from them. But the remaining kids onboard were too afraid to move, too afraid of the flecks of glass in their hair, too afraid of the lack of food and shelter and water outside. So they stayed inside. The kids outside kept yelling anyway.

But what do they know.

I hoped their rhetoric wasn’t getting into the heads of the kids left inside the cabin. I slam shut the accordion doors, whatever good that could do with all the wind seeping through the broken windows. I turned around on the highway, bumping through the valleyed median. The bus was in complete disrepair, crumpled and scratched. There was no way I could safely travel as fast as before. I needed to get us back to the last urban center. In the next few hours, wind whipping at everyone’s hair and eyes and mouths, nobody spoke. I ate a nutritional bar and hoped none of the rebels had popped a tire.

Driving back along the outer loop of the metro area, slower now due to bumper-to-bumper traffic and unable to get into my special lane, I saw a woman in a mechanic’s jumper waving to us. She was old with peppered hair down to her waist. Perhaps she could take a look at the bus, maybe we could get moving again with her help.

So I stopped the bus. I saw that her hands were covered in grease. I opened the accordion doors. A stitched nametag above her left breast read: *Camille*. And her doe-eyes were familiar, identical to the image of young Camille's face, a face fresh in my mind in the hours that passed inside the bus, while she aged decades outside.

I asked her if she'd been on this bus before. "Of course I have," she told me, "There's no reason I'd be here otherwise. I've learned over the years that even though these buses are fast, news about accidents and rebellions with them comes quick."

Embarrassed that she knew about the rebellion, I try to talk about repairing the bus. "Is this bus able to run safely much longer?"

"Did you know what I've been doing these decades?" She wasn't ready to talk about helping me. And of course I didn't know. I didn't answer, but she continued anyway.

"I've designed better buses." She stepped on board and leaned against my dashboard. I heard the bone-settling crack of her elbows. "Because of what you do, all I could think of was the bus I met you on. And how I could make them better, and how maybe, just maybe, you'd love me for improving the bus that you love. So you ask me if this bus can run safely. I tell you that even if it could, I could put you in a better one. So, will you join me?"

The kids were windswept, lips chapped from the rip of dry air, their bodies cramped by their averaged seating. Every one of them stepped off the bus and waited on the side of the road.

Thanks to Professor Randall Kenan, a guide whose absence would guarantee that what you've read would be much worse.

Thanks to my parents, and my friends, and my family, none of whom thought this was a bad way to spend my time.

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